Edward Lear's India and the Colonial Production of Nonsense

"Sometimes I think I will cut away to Bombay, . . . do parts of India as I can," wrote the landscape painter and nonsense poet Edward Lear to a friend in 1872: "The Himalayas, Darjeeling, Delhi, Ceylon, etc, etc, are what I have always wished to see" (*Later Letters* 149). It would not take long for this ambition to be realised. Lear travelled to India late the following year and spent thirteen months crisscrossing the subcontinent, seeing grand Himalayan vistas, Hindu pilgrimage towns, what he called, punningly, "the Dehlicate architecture" of Delhi (*Later Letters* 171), as well as the hill-stations of Simla, Coonoor, and Ooty, and the tropical coastlines of Malabar and Ceylon.[1] Much was as Lear expected: as the "etc, etc" of his 1872 letter indicates, a conventional itinerary existed that provided Lear with the picturesque impression of India his art required. More surprising was the coincidence of this impression with "British stationism," "out-post Indian-Anglos," and other marks of colonial activity. "The quiet of this place is a delight, just now only broken by the sound of hymns at the Wesleyan Chapel near," Lear wrote in his journal during his visit to Trichinopoly in southern India: "Verily, India is an odd place."[2]

Lear's encounter with a culture in some ways recognisable but in others strange provided fresh inspiration for his poetry. Relatively little notice has been taken of the poems

he composed in India, but they are important at once for our understanding and appreciation of Lear's work, and for what they reveal about the significance of colonial interaction for Victorian nonsense writing. Indeed, their nature suggests the need to reconsider the relationship between nonsense literature and Victorian imperialism, which previous studies have found to be largely embedded rather than explicit. For example: Daniel Bivona conceives of Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) as a "child-imperialist" who is "incapable of constructing, on a model radically different from her own, the 'system' or 'systems' that give meaning to the behavior of the creatures" she encounters in Wonderland (56), a claim which enables Carroll's text to be heralded as "the most impressive comic critique of British ethnocentrism in the age of imperialism" (71). There is no suggestion of any direct reference to empire in the *Alice* books; Bivona's argument instead proceeds on the understanding that imperialism represented the "unconscious" of nineteenth-century Britain, "lurking under the surface of a variety of discourses, conditioning the possibilities for the emergence of some and precluding others" (viii).

This manner of interpretation adopts what Rita Felski describes as the logic of critique, in which "reading is imagined as an act of digging down to arrive at a repressed or otherwise obscured reality" (53); it has the limitations Felski identifies in such logic, leading to a view of nonsense

literature as either symptom or antithesis of a dominant order or established outlook. A different notion of the colonial valences of Victorian nonsense is possible when we realize that these do not always need to be unearthed from hidden depths, but can instead be witnessed in nonsense's play of language. Part of the importance of Lear's Indian poetry, I want to suggest, is that it reveals how this language recasts the discourse of the exotic in its borrowings from the mis-readings and mis-translations of colonial encounter.

Ahead of his departure for India Lear had penned a fanciful poem about a religious leader who held sway in part of its north-western borderland, "The Akond of Swat" (1873). In the course of his journey to the subcontinent Lear also entered into his diary a short verse which begins "The Attalik Ghaz*ee*" (1873). Whilst actually in India, he produced half a dozen limericks, most of which were written as he sat out a thunderstorm at Narkunda, in north-western India, at the end of April 1874. Perhaps most significant among his Indian nonsense, however, is a poem virtuosic in its misuse of Anglo-Indian words, which are wrongly applied so as to lend a fabulous colouring to what are actually ordinary persons and things. This is "The Cummerbund," subtitled "An Indian Poem," a piece written in April 1874 and first published in the Bombay edition of the *Times of India* later that year.

The manner of these poems suggests the need to arrive at a new understanding of the colonial dimensions of Victorian

nonsense. “The Cummerbund,” in particular, is a poem of the “contact zone,” to use Mary Louise Pratt’s term, of spaces (as Pratt puts it) “where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (4), and which is used by her to indicate “the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination” (7). Lear in this poem plays off a tradition of writing which drew its laughs from the tendency of Anglo-Indian life and language to appear obscure and even incomprehensible to outsiders. It is a poem that both mocks metropolitan fantasies of Indian exoticism and casts a wry look at the sense of separateness cultivated by Anglo-Indian society.

At the same time, I propose that “The Cummerbund” does more than confound familiar images of India. What the poem instead reveals is the dialectic by which Victorian nonsense could at once be produced from gaps in understanding habitual to colonial encounter and yet also render this origin elusive by virtue of its dispersal into an obscure foreign allure. “The Cummerbund” had its genesis within a highly specific Anglo-Indian setting. Converted into a children’s poem in a later collection of Lear’s nonsense, however, it slips beyond precise cultural and historical coordinates in the creation of exotic effects that are not just parodic, but also lyrical.

This collection of nonsense had the title *Laughable Lyrics* (1877), and it was made up of poems Lear named "Nonsense Songs," twin appellations that taken together suggest one important way in which the fraught and contested category of "lyric" pertains to Lear's poetry: through its affinity with song. In common with other Victorian poets Elizabeth Helsinger identifies as holding the same affinity, Lear in his longer poems turned to verse genres and practices modelled on song, particularly the Romantic ballad. His writing has an abiding fascination with what Helsinger describes as "song's non-discursive structures, its power to generate chains of associated figures of speech and sound, metaphor and rhyme, ordered by rhythms of recurrence that move with thought and feeling" (32). "The Cummerbund" has not the same burden of refrain and repetition found in other Lear poems. My argument, however, is that the poem's play upon the thrilling sonority of exotic words creates a knowing but nevertheless only partially parodic verbal music that savours what it also mocks.

Encountering this verbal music, it would be possible to attempt a form of demystification and try to uncover what is masked by nonsense elements in Lear's poem, which would likely be identified as what Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) describes as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). This is indeed the approach taken by the one previous study specifically of

Lear's Indian poetry, in which what appears benign and inconsequential in Lear is exposed as anything but: "Much of the unpleasantness of my task springs from my attempt to see in this genial spirit and his 'innocent' pleasure-giving work an orientalist streak," remarks its author, Sumanyu Satpathy (73-74). Yet the expectation that in its relation to colonialism Victorian nonsense has a dark motive of which it is unaware, and which it is left to vigilant critics to uncover, assumes a passivity that the texts themselves do not actually bear out. That the roots of nonsense literature (if not always its ends) are frequently parodic makes the genre intensely aware of its own processes. To consider the representation of cultural difference in Victorian nonsense only as symptomatic of forces external to it disregards this self-reflexivity. When exoticism is as knowing as it is in Lear and in other nonsense writers of his period, our attention should instead be directed to what Nathan K. Hensley, in his recent *Forms of Empire* (2016), calls "acts of thinking . . . texts themselves perform" (17). Rather than unwittingly transmitting or subverting ideology, I suggest that nonsense's play of language enables the desire for the exotic to be contemplated in plain view.

I.

The relation of nonsense literature to the ordinary world has long been a matter of debate. On one side are those who contend that nonsense constitutes its own separate domain, whether because playing a game with systems of sense in language, and thus inhabiting a place in which (as Elizabeth Sewell observes) "all the world is paper and all the seas are ink" (17), or because involving the creation of an alternative reality with its own rules and structures. In the opposite camp are those equally convinced that nonsense is interested in more than just logic and language, and also, as Peter Robinson says of Edward Lear, that nonsense "operates in the one world where the usual rules of reference are not suspended": "If it were not taking place in this one world," Robinson declares, "then it wouldn't be 'nonsense', wouldn't be underlining the assumptions of reference by signally flouting them" (61).

The truth may be somewhere in between these competing conceptions of nonsense. In relation to Lear in particular, it seems more accurate to say that "his poetry usually has its eyes on multiple realities at once: both escape into a space with its own nonsense-governed rules, and the tensions, transactions, and counterpoints between that world and the world in which we and the poem live" (Williams and Bevis 6). Take the first of his Indian poems, "The Akond of Swat." This poem was inspired by a small news item Lear encountered in the *Times of India* in July 1873, which in its entirety runs: "It

is reported from Swat that the Akhoond's son has quarrelled with his father, and left the parental presence with a following of 500 sowars, refusing to listen to the Akhoond's orders to come back" ("Notice"). Enclosing the poem with a letter to a friend in September of that year, Lear explained that "I send a ridiculous effusion, which in some quarters delighteth--on the *Ahkond of Swat*;--of whom one has read in the papers, and some one wrote to me to ask, 'who or what is he'--to which I sent this reply..." (*Later Letters* 161-62). It is a reply that begins thus:

> Who, or why, or which, or *what*, Is the Akond of SWAT?
>
> Is he tall or short, or dark or fair?
> Does he sit on a stool or a sofa or chair or SQUAT,
> The Akond of Swat?
>
> Is he wise or foolish, young or old?
> Does he drink his soup and his coffee cold or HOT,
> The Akond of Swat?
>
> Does he sing or whistle, jabber or talk,
> And when riding abroad does he gallop or walk or TROT
> The Akond of Swat?
>
> Does he wear a turban, a fez, or a hat?

Does he sleep on a mattress, a bed, or a mat or a COT,
The Akond of Swat?

(lines 1-13)

These questions seem innocent enough, but the poem's speculations soon turn to the sinister manner in which the Akond may exercise his authority:

Do his people like him extremely well?
Or do they, whenever they can, rebel or PLOT,
At the Akond of Swat?

If he catches them then, either old or young,
Does he have them chopped in pieces or hung or SHOT,
The Akond of Swat?

Do his people prig in the lanes or park?
Or even at times, when days are dark GAROTTE,
O the Akond of Swat!

Does he study the wants of his own dominion?
Or doesn't he care for public opinion a JOT
The Akond of Swat?

To amuse his mind do his people show him
Pictures, or anyone's last new poem or WHAT,

For the Akond of Swat?

At night if he suddenly screams and wakes,
Do they bring him only a few small cakes or a LOT,
For the Akond of Swat?

Does he live on turnips, tea, or tripe?
Does he like his shawl to be marked with a stripe
or a DOT,
The Akond of Swat?

(lines 20-40)

And so the poem goes on, with no obvious need to end where it does, veering wildly and delightedly between imagining the exercise of alien power and speculations about the Akond's domestic arrangements, some of which appear innocent (as in the conjectures about his diet and shawl), while others are violent ("Does he beat his wife with a gold-topped pipe," the poem later asks, "When she lets the gooseberries grow too ripe or ROT, | The Akond of Swat?").

At the level of form, Lear's poem on the Akond of Swat is a verbal stunt made to continue for just long enough to achieve the effect of the just-too-long, offering a manner of enquiry that is funny in itself for a bit, before becoming funny for its extravagance. Part of the joke is that even at its close the poem appears no wiser about the identity of its

subject: “Someone, or nobody, knows I wot | Who or which or why or what | Is the Akond of Swat!” (lines 65-67). There is here an elaborate mockery of any attempt to comprehend the poem that would seek to move on from its highly artificial organisation by rhyme. Indeed, “The Akond of Swat” makes a show of the fact that its non-semantic features refuse to be made auxiliary to external reference. According to Veronica Forrest-Thomson, this is done “in order to assert the autonomy poetry grants to the imagination in language” (122).

The nature of the poem’s construction frames what can be said about its colonial perceptions. Such perceptions are certainly at issue in the poem: Lear’s note to “The Akond of Swat” in *Laughable Lyrics*--“For the existence of this potentate see Indian newspapers, *passim*”--sets up a trail that although hardly serious is also other than false. This is because the poem’s comedy depends partly on the belief that such a ruler might well chop opponents to his rule in pieces (or hang them, or shoot them), as it does the conjecture that he may, or more likely may not, study the wants of his own dominion. These assumed possibilities are then used to place into greater relief the absurdity of the speculations about the Akond’s culinary and sartorial preferences. We see here a more pronounced imperialist cast to Lear’s nonsense than has been noticed elsewhere in his poetry, in which fantastical departures to the remote and faraway have been said to mirror

the “compulsiveness of British imperial globe-trotting” (Swaab xiv).

At the same time, however, the precedence accorded to verbal dexterity in the poem’s construction disrupts the attempt to take any one of its speculations about the Akond more seriously than any other. If so much depends on the chances of rhyme, the shadowy mystique lent to the Akond by some of these speculations comes to seem nearly as spurious as the possibility that his preference is to “sleep and snore in a dark green cave,” or that he is inclined to “wear a white tie when he dines with friends,” or likes to “sail about on an inland lake” (lines 49, 54, 62).

The difficulty this creates for habits of critical interpretation is characteristic of the relationship between Victorian nonsense and colonialism more generally. It would be possible to indict “The Akond of Swat” as a jest produced partly from an outsider’s incomprehension of Indian culture, which in making a spectacle of otherness is able somewhat to tame and assimilate cultural difference. This is indeed the approach taken by Satpathy in his account of Lear’s Indian poetry, leading to the critique that “In every catalogue of alternatives [offered in “The Akond of Swat”] the sign of the native is stereotypically present” (78). He is right to observe that stock descriptions of Indian people and their rulers help to facilitate the poem’s joke. It is humdrum pursuits which are made to seem incongruous in this context,

and not the Akond's foreignness, which by contrast takes predictable form; the poem here aligns with what Lear, thinking most likely of the *Arabian Nights*, once called in a letter to his sister "the Barbaric despot sort of thing one has read of as a child" (cited in Uglow 178). Even so, the poem's invocation of racial stereotypes cannot be isolated from the fact that Lear's fun also depends upon sabotaging our desire to find the logic of rhyme semantically meaningful. The prospect that nonsense might be deciphered as an ideological symptom is at once raised by Lear's evocation of a melange of exotic tropes, and also complicated by his poem's structuring by coincidences of sound. As much as we might wish to find safer, more sceptical grounds for its analysis, then, "The Akond of Swat" also returns us to delight in the daftness of its game of language.

II.

"The Akond of Swat" exemplifies something of the way Victorian nonsense literature plays upon what Foster calls "the illusion that the exotic is in the world rather than of the imagination" (27). Exotic tropes are at once summoned and, in depending so obviously on the chances of rhyme, also made to seem insubstantial. "The Cummerbund" achieves similar effects in its use of Anglo-Indian language. The poem was first published in the *Times of India* in Bombay in June 1874,

appearing in a column entitled “Whims of the Week,” under the heading “A Poetic Interlude”:

She sate upon her Dobie,
   To watch the Evening Star,
And all the Punkahs as they passed,
   Cried, ‘My! how fair you are!’
Around her bower, with quivering leaves,
   The tall Kamsamahs grew,
And Kitmutgars in wild festoons
   Hung down from Tchokis blue.

Below her home the river rolled
   With soft meloobious sound,
Where golden-finned Chuprassies swam,
   In myriads circling round.
Above, on tallest trees remote,
   Green Ayahs perched alone,
And all night long the Mussak moan’d
   Its melancholy tone.

And where the purple Nullahs threw
   Their branches far and wide,--
The silvery Goreewallahs flew
   In silence, side by side,--

The little Bheesties' twittering cry
   Rose on the flagrant air,
And oft the angry Jampan howled
   Deep in his hateful lair.

She sate upon her Dobie,--
   She heard the Nimmak hum,--
When all at once a cry arose,--
   'The Cummerbund is come!'
In vain she fled:--with open jaws
   The angry monster followed,
And so, (before assistance came,)
   That Lady Fair was swollowed.

They sought in vain for even a bone
   Respectfully to bury,
They said,--'Hers was a dreadful fate!'
   (And Echo answered 'Very.')
They nailed her Dobie to the wall,
   Where last her form was seen,
And underneath they wrote these words,
   In yellow, blue, and green:--

'Beware, ye Fair! Ye Fair, beware!
   Nor sit out late at night,--
Lest horrid Cummerbunds should come,

And swollow you outright.’

“The Cummerbund” is not the only poem that Lear first published outside of his own volumes of nonsense. Yet it is the only Lear poem to have had its initial appearance in a publication for adults, and with good reason, for in this context the poem’s humour--unusually for Lear--cannot be said to be notably childlike.

In the *Times of India* column “Whims of the Week,” “The Cummerbund” was sandwiched between two only slightly wry comment pieces on local issues of the day. The first of these addressed problems with the planting of a row of trees on the Esplanade in Bombay; the second related to plans to move a hydraulic lift dock for ships from its current awkward location on an island in Bombay Harbour. These may seem odd neighbours for Lear’s poem, but their juxtaposition appears less strange when we understand the poem as itself local to the British in India. The word “cummerbund” is one of those Anglo-Indian words (like “bungalow” or “dungarees”) to have since entered into general English usage, but that word apart, it is necessary to have recourse to *Hobson-Jobson*, the quirky dictionary of British India, to make sense of it all--or rather, to make out the nonsense, for with dictionary definitions in hand it becomes apparent that what purports to be the tale of a fantastic event occurring in a tropical setting actually involves a host of objects and persons

ordinary to Anglo-Indian life. According to *Hobson-Jobson*, “dhoby” or “dobie” means a “washer-man”; a “punkah” is “the large fixed and swinging fan, formed of cloth stretched on a rectangular frame, and suspended from the ceiling”; a “consumah” or “khansama” is “a house-steward”; “kitmutgar” is a word “habitually applied to a Musulman servant”; “choky” is used to mean “a station of police; a lockup; also a station of palankin bearers, horses, &c., when a post is laid; a customs or toll-station”; a “chuprassy” is “an office-messenger, or henchman”; “ayah” means “native lady’s-maid or nurse-maid”; “mussuck” is a “leathern water-bag”; “nullah” means “A watercourse”; a “gorawallah” is “A groom or horsekeeper”; “bheesty” indicates “the domestic . . . who supplies the family with water, carrying it in a mussuck”; a “jompon” is “A kind of sedan, or portable chair used chiefly by the ladies at the Hill Sanitaria of Upper India”; “nimmack” is “salt”. Thus a literal summary of the first half of Lear’s poem might run as follows: “She sits upon her washerman as the fans pass. Around her bower there are cook-butlers growing, and servants hanging down from police stations. In the river nearby swim office-messengers, nurse-maids perch on trees, and a leather water-bag moans all night long. Watercourses throw out their branches and horse-keepers fly by in silence. The water-carriers’ cry rises on the air, and a portable chair howls in his lair. Just before the appearance of the waist-belt, salt is heard to hum.”

The Anglo-Indian words used in the poem were habitual to Lear in his time in India. "Kitmutgar," "ayahs," "punkah," "nullah," and "khamsamah" all appear in his Indian journal (*Indian Journal* 105, 109, 147, 159, 204); negotiations with "dhobies" over Lear's washing are a notable feature of its pages. "The Cummerbund" was made possible by encounters like this: it is a poem of the "contact zone," to use Pratt's term, of spaces (as Pratt puts it) "in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (6). What results has little of the "disquiet about . . . the assumption of superiority over other races" and spoofing of "the arrogance of empire" seen in some other of Lear's nonsense pieces (Uglow 367, 369). Instead, when the literal meaning of the poem's words is known and contemplated, the fantastical fate imagined for the "Dobie" of Lear's poem, who ends up "nailed . . . to the wall," offers a disturbing suggestion of perceived savagery. There may be a trace here of what Patrick Brantlinger describes in British writing about India after the 1857 rebellion, in which "India is portrayed as mired in changeless patterns of superstition and violence which can be dominated but not necessarily altered for the better" (200).

What Lear had earlier called "the Indian horror, (beg pardon the 'mutiny')" (*Letters* 86) was certainly in his mind

during his visit to the subcontinent, and with George Trevelyan's account of the siege of the British garrison at Cawnpore in hand he made the requisite pilgrimage to the mythologized locations of the rebellion, including the fortified house defended by a small British force at Arrah, west of Patna, which he described after his visit as "one of those places that include or exhibit a marked episode of a great phase of English history" (*Indian Journal* 74). As a British traveller, Lear in India may have been "in a bubble, floating above the people of the country" (Uglow 438), but he knew in the Anglo-Indian words which he used and heard an erratically hybrid product of the "copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices" between colonizers and colonized familiar to the "contact zone" (Pratt 7).

Proximity to the "contact zone" of colonial India determines, in the case of "The Cummerbund," what can be made of the poem: a scene likely to appear mysterious and strange to the uninitiated will be identified as an amusing misassignment of everyday words to those, such as the poem's Anglo-Indian first readers, who find themselves in the know. The effect is at once to invoke the discourse of the exotic and, at the same time, to expose as illusion the notion that this discourse is a means to assimilating cultural difference. Exoticism, as Graham Huggan observes, is "a particular mode of aesthetic *perception*, which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively

manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery" (13). The misapplication of obscurely foreign language for nonsense purposes runs opposite to this mode of perception in that any otherness is meant to be recognized as obviously manufactured, and thus comical.

Anglo-Indian newspapers in this period served as "a forum in which the British community in India could write for (and often about) itself, thus enabling the development of a sense of local and colonial identity, related to but also set apart from the identity of the British at 'home'" (Ní Fhlathúin, *British India* 9). In addition, comic verse written by the British in India often drew "on the vernacular of British India, full of loan-words and local terms not immediately familiar to metropolitan readers": "The deliberate misuse of these terms in contexts designed to mislead the naïve reader becomes a long-standing joke in the literature" (Ní Fhlathúin, "Poetry of the Everyday" 102). Lear's genius in "The Cummerbund" is to discover the potential for nonsense within this procedure. One of Lear's drafts of the poem includes the following note, a note which suggests how "The Cummerbund" might have been understood in its initial Anglo-Indian context even if it did not in the end accompany the poem in any of its published versions:

> The following affecting stanzas founded on fact, have lately been published in England by a Lady whose long

> residence in India & whose knowledge of its customs & produce, are as widely appreciated in that Country as her Poetical Genius. A glossary of the Indian names occurring in the poem is added, less as an explanation of their meaning, than as a proof of the Authoress's truthful and talented descriptions united with the adaptation of Hindostanee words with English verse.--
> Cummerbund, a sort of Tiger or Leopard of immense size & ferocious nature
> Dobie,--a silk cushion
> Punkah--a wandering minstrel
> Khamsameh, a tree of the poplar kind
> Kitmutgar--a sort of convolvulus
> (*Complete Nonsense* 532-33)

Fake definitions are a favourite nonsense device, of which the most famous example are those written to accompany the short piece Lewis Carroll wrote in 1855 for his family magazine *Mischmasch*, entitled "Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry"; this stanza was provided in *Mischmasch* with a bogus glossary, parts of which reappeared in *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), where the same stanza opened the poem "Jabberwocky." Lear's specious definitions play upon the familiarity of exotic tropes, which seem to absorb foreignness but are actually, as Foster observes, "derived from what is close at hand" (22): the note relates the strangeness a domestic British reader might expect

from an Indian scene, but that the strangeness is actually counterfeit reveals this expectation to be a projection.

Lear's poem most obviously mocks the foreign colouring seen in the language of earlier oriental tales as in more recent representations of India intended for a British public hungry for first-hand insight into life in the "jewel in the crown" of Empire. These domestic readers are not the only butt of the poem's joke, however, for the definitions help us to realise that Lear is also poking fun at the obtrusive wearing of special knowledge by those on the colonial periphery. Carroll's "Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry," with its fake definitions, is a pastiche of the mining of Anglo-Saxon literature by nineteenth-century philology.[3] Like Carroll in his "Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry," Lear in "The Cummerbund" is also occupied with writing that necessitates supplementary explanation. The poem's fun derives from the fact that much Anglo-Indian writing of the time made an exhibition of its cultural particularity. Commenting on the occurrence in Kipling's early fiction of "the untranslated phrase, the unglossed allusion, the in-joke, the unapologetic gesture toward structures of feeling and experience which had no counterpart outside the enclosed world of Anglo-India," Stephen Arata remarks that "Kipling's fictions tend not to represent the exotic as imaginatively available for the domestic reader. Instead, what his stories repeatedly show are the circumstances under which the exotic might become

available, but only for a select coterie of Anglo-Indians" (155). Lear in India had been reading Walter Yeldham's *Lays of Ind* (1871; second series, 1873), a book compiled from comic verses originally published in English language newspapers in India under the pseudonym "Aliph Cheem" (the first and seventh characters of the Persian alphabet), and dedicated to "To Anglo-Indian Folk | Who can relish a little joke," but like a good deal of Anglo-Indian poetry also read outside India: later editions of Yeldham's book carried a glossary for English readers.[4] There is in Yeldham's collection the same concern with the cultural specificity of British life in India found in Kipling, of which one token--in Yeldham as in Kipling--is the use of Anglo-Indian argot.

Lear in "The Cummerbund" inhabits this concern with the particularity of Anglo-India, but also sends it up. This is an in-joke that is not entirely kind to those on the inside of the joke, for whom the particularity of their poetry's words is shown to involve a kind of mystification: in contrast to what Arata notes of Kipling, what is most obviously made available to the Anglo-Indian reader is a sense of the exotic as fabricated. "The Cummerbund" thus has a dual appeal. Its false deployment of Anglo-Indian words plays upon the likelihood that a metropolitan outsider might miss the spuriousness of Lear's usages, and yet the poem also mocks the obscurity of Anglo-Indian habits of language as might just such an outsider to the colonial periphery. Both the

outsider's mockery and the in-joke depend on the confined nature of Anglo-Indian experience, but viewed from opposite sides of the divide between colonial and metropolitan culture, meaning that the poem's cultural coordinates are at once of the imperial centre and of its margins. Performing double service, "The Cummerbund" is animated by gaps of understanding that the poem itself was able to bridge.

This realisation helps to extend our sense of the intricate cultural affiliations which framed English language poetry in colonial India. A feature of recent work on this topic has been its emphasis on what Gibson calls "the mutually constitutive history of British and Indian poets working on the subcontinent in the nineteenth century," with "the story of this verse" described as "a tale of arranged marriage between cultures" (*Indian Angles* 3, 279). Lear's example suggests how this same history might also involve an alliance between different positions of dislocation within the Empire. "'Exile,' 'immigrant,' 'expatriate,' 'colonialist,' 'traveler'": as Daniel E. White notes in his study of cultural connections between Britain and India in the Romantic period, "these are shifting terms produced by imperial circulation" (144). Their continued affinity in Victorian-era India is shown by the publication of an expatriate traveller's poem in a newspaper column emphatically local to the Anglo-Indian community. Indeed, Lear's mimicking of the concerns of Anglo-Indian poetry may have been a way of demonstrating the

facility with which he was able to adapt to his colonial surroundings, having the mixed impulse typical of anti-touristic displays of cultural sensitivity by travellers in this period, which show both an "urge for deep and demonstrable contact" in visited places and celebrate "the privileged position of the detached spectator" (Buzard 13). The life of travel Lear undertook for his art was not far from constituting a type of "imperial career," to apply David Lambert and Alan Lester's term for those "who made their way in the world as servants of empire . . . or whose professional lives took place in an imperial context" (23), and whose notion of empire was "not simply exported from the imperial centre, nor indeed imported from the periphery" but "developed across multiple spaces" (25). One of its products is the skill in mediating between insider and outsider status in colonial culture Lear displays in "The Cummerbund".

Lear's poem does not appear in either of two important recent anthologies intended to showcase poetry written in English on the subcontinent in his period, Máire Ní Fhlathúin's *The Poetry of British India, 1780–1905* and Gibson's *Anglophone Poetry in Colonial India, 1780–1913*. That "The Cummerbund" does not find a place in these anthologies may be a result of the idea that nonsense writing is a special case of literature because of its absorption in games of logic and language. It likely also has to do with the way the poem's localness became indistinct once it had moved outside of

India. At first parochially Anglo-Indian in its readership, Lear's poem was capable of circulating widely in Britain and elsewhere after it had appeared in *Laughable Lyrics*, which had its first American publication in the collected *Nonsense Books* edition of 1888. What is significant in this second phase of circulation is that the poem was able to gather distance from the colonial "contact zone" which had provided its inspiration. Soon it became possible to praise "The Cummerbund" for its "foreign yet melodious words, full of music and suggesting sweet strange passages of colour" (as did the *Saturday Review* in 1876 [734]) without referring to the specifically Anglo-Indian character of its language. To see the poem in this context after having first noticed its origins in colonial encounter shows how, and to what effect, nonsense can become unmoored from historical and cultural specificity. In its initial appearance in the *Times of India*, "The Cummerbund" looks to be shaped from what Pratt calls "the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters" (7); converted into a children's poem so as to be incorporated into the last book Lear published in his lifetime, this inspiration for the poem is less easily discerned, and the associations opened by alluringly unfamiliar words are as a result given freer rein. The next section shows this transformation to be characteristic of the way Victorian nonsense reconfigures the colonial exotic in its play of language.

III.

The desire of Anglo-Indian writers to enshrine in writing a sense of specialness and separation comes close to a dream common to much nonsense literature: that of a flight from the public nature of language. Indeed, part of the attraction of Victorian nonsense writers to the mis-translation and mis-communication bred by colonial encounter is that it allowed them to toy with the impossible idea that words might escape their situation and be released into free association. In Lear's case, the obvious partner to "The Cummerbund" is a short verse he had earlier composed as he sailed from Corfu in 1863:

She sits upon her Bulbul
   Through the long long hours of night--
And o'er the dark horizon gleams
   The Yashmack's fitful light.
The lone Yaourt sails slowly down
   The deep and craggy dell--
And from his lofty nest, loud screams
   The white-plumed Asphodel.

The conceit here is identical to that later employed in "The Cummerbund", involving the misapplication of foreign words: a "bulbul" is a species of bird "sometimes called the

'nightingale' of the East"; a "yashmack" or "yashmak" is "The double veil concealing the part of the face below the eyes, worn by Muslim women in public"; "yaourt" is "A fermented liquor made by the Turks from milk"; and the "asphodel" is "A genus of liliaceous plants with very handsome flowers, mostly natives of the south of Europe" (all *OED*).

Neither "The Cummerbund" nor "She sits upon her Bulbul" are offered only in jest, however. What the words of each poem describe may not have much reality, a fact which is the source of Lear's fun, but loosed from any specific cultural context their musicality is genuine. As Richard Cronin observes of "She sits upon her Bulbul": "all the way through semantic solecisms tussle with a quite unironical lyricism, and in [the poem's] final lines it is the lyrical impulse that triumphs" (261). The lyricism is of a specific kind. Lear's longer poems have been described as "like warped Tennyson" (Haughton, "Introduction" 19); he equally had a talent for warping Tennyson's own work, writing a parody of the poem Tennyson addressed to him upon receiving one of Lear's travel books, "To E. L., on His Travels in Greece" (1853). Lear's parody notices the illusoriness in the original poem of the place names Tennyson had included in the first two stanzas of "To E. L."--"Illyria," "Peneïa," "Akrokeraunia," "Tomohrit," and "Athos"--by, for example, substituting "*Tom-Moory* Pathos" for what had been Tennyson's "Tomohrit, Athos" (*Later Letters* 161). As Anna Barton remarks, "By reducing these names to

their sounds, and then filling up these sounds with references to the experiences that the mimicked names' reality held for him, Lear draws attention to their emptiness in Tennyson's poem" and highlights that Tennyson's response to the places of Lear's travel book is "to text rather than travel" (320). The parody is affectionate, and what Lear mocked in Tennyson he could also reprise. In "She sits upon her Bulbul," picturesque description (or pseudo-description) is at the service of a pure and hollow sonority. Mockery of the affectations of orientalist poetry is only part of what the poem is about, for Lear is just as importantly playing with the possibilities of bewitchingly strange language. The combination results in an evocation of the exotic which both humorously recognizes the familiarity of the illusion involved and which delights in the engagement of words fascinatingly distant from common usage.

This is a familiar pattern in Victorian nonsense. Non-nonsensical light verse of the period makes obvious the falsity of its alien words--as in W. S. Gilbert's "Bab Ballads" (1866-71), whose cast includes such absurdly and offensively-named figures as "King Borria Bungalee Boo" and his subjects "Pish-Tush-Pooh-Bah," "Doodle-Dum-Deh," "Alack-a-Dey-Ah," and "Tootle-Tum-Teh". Nonsense poetry, by contrast, uses exotic words which tend to be not just comic, but also expressive. Take the first stanza of Henry Sambrooke Leigh's "Cossimbazar," from *Carols of Cockayne* (1869):

Come fleetly, come fleetly, my hookabadar,
For the sound of the tam-tam is heard from afar.
"Banoolah! Banoolah! The Brahmins are nigh,
And the depths of the jungle re-echo their cry.
Pestonjee Bomanjee!
Smite the guitar;
Join in the chorus, my hookabadar.
(lines 1-7)

The knowingness with which the exotic is evoked here does not cancel out trust in its reality; instead, the dreams and fantasies which habitually gather around the exotic are by force of linguistic invention and misapplication given new and strange life. In one way, the poem sees that "representation of the exotic is essentially an act of appropriation or assimilation--for the purposes of the centre--of the otherness of the unknown periphery" (Forsdick 48): its joke is that the wildly inaccurate use of Anglo-Indian words such as "hookabadar" (meaning "pipe-bearer") and "Brahmin" are nearly indistinct and thus almost acceptable within a discourse occupied with rendering cultural differences familiar. Yet in its nonsense elements the poem also finds the freedom to summon new exotic effects. Semantic solecisms here perform double service, being both parodic and lyrical; there is here what Helsinger, writing about Victorian poetry and song, names

"a ritual music of words," "the compulsive power of sound patterning savoured for its own sake" (64).

The double nature of the exotic in Victorian nonsense poetry, both alluring and knowingly contrived, anticipates what we might want to say about it, for these poems not only demonstrate but actually *see* that the exotic is "an image about which gathers the hoped for realization of one's fantasies and the fulfilment of all one's secret dreams" (Foster 24). This possibility is opened by the frequent imprecision of nonsense literature's cultural and historical location, vague enough that it cannot be tied down just to mockery of a specific literary or cultural target; it also depends on the capacity for nonsense writing to outstrip the parodic function which is often its initial purpose and motivation. When nonsense writing remains rooted in parody its effects tend to be narrower, as for instance in Owen Seaman's parody of Sir Edwin Arnold's hugely popular epic poem on the life of the Buddha, *The Light of Asia* (1879):

The bulbul hummeth like a book
Upon the pooh-pooh tree,
And now and then he takes a look
At you and me,
At me and you.
Kuchi!
Koochoo!

The Light of Asia, along with Edward FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1859), is among a number of Victorian works to "evince the reordering of early Romantic exoticism along a philological, comparative axis" (Rangarajan 129); in its exaggeration and absurdity, Seaman's poem straightforwardly tries to undermine the impression that such a reordering lent this type of exoticism new authenticity. By contrast, when nonsense is less dependent on parody, it is able to comprehend the appeal as well as the falsity of such modes of representation. That is true of such exotic items in Lear as the "Bong-tree" native to the land to which the Owl and the Pussy-cat travel, a coinage which manages to be at once evocative and recognisably silly. It also applies to texts we are less in the habit of calling nonsense literature, such as this verse from Christina Rossetti's nursery rhyme collection, *Sing-Song* (1872):

> "Kookoorookoo! kookoorookoo!"
>
> Crows the cock before the morn;
>
> "Kikirikee! kikirikee!"
>
> Roses in the east are born.
>
> "Kookoorookoo! kookoorookoo!"
>
> Early birds begin their singing;

"Kikirikee! kikirikee!"

The day, the day, the day is springing.

The scene for this poem could well be English--it appeared in *Sing-Song* illustrated by Arthur Hughes, with an image that included an old well, "sketched at Cookham Dene, near Maidenhead" (264)--but it is striking that the rooster's chant is not rendered in conventional English manner ("cock-a-doodle-doo"), but rather in a form owed to other languages, of which some possibilities are French ("*cocorico*"), Italian ("*chicchirichì*") and Spanish ("*quiquiriquí*"), lending the poem an appearance of foreignness that is difficult to place exactly. According to Constance Hassett, "poems in animal voices are a reminder that all poetry is, in some sense, translation, a crossing from one language . . . into another"; she sees demonstrated in "Kookoorookoo" "a kind of induced self-forgetting through immersion in words" (148). It is plausible that this captivation by language has a hint of that seen in Victorian nonsense writing: an exoticism of no precise cultural location which shows both the appeal and the artificiality of its construction.

These twin aspects of "Kookoorookoo"--the captivation by language and the trace of an obscure foreignness--are part of what help it to function so well as a children's poem, keenly sensitive both to children's delight in wordplay and sound patterning, and to their capacity for imagination and wonder.

Individual precedents for "Kookoorookoo" are hard to identify, but the prevalence of nonsense exoticism in children's poetry of the period more generally is largely a product of Lear's popularity and influence. This went beyond national borders. The trace left by Lear's interest in the mis-readings and mis-translations of colonial encounter on American nonsense poets in particular sees his manner of nonsense exoticism become transcultural in more than just its dependence, as in the case of "The Cummerbund," upon what have been called "imperial circuits and transperipheral exchanges" (Gibson, "Introduction" 325). It is again the dialectic between the particular colonial origins of such mis-readings and mis-translations and the hazy cultural and geographical location of the nonsense realm that proves crucial here, for it creates the conditions in which nonsense writing bears the imprint of colonial encounter even in texts which appear distant from or unaware of British imperial contexts. In the composition of Eugene Field's "The Dinkey-Bird" (1894) according to a nonsense template suggested by Lear, for instance, we see unusual evidence of what Priya Joshi terms "the cultural traffic spawned around the globe by Victorian ideology and policies" (20). Here are the poem's first two stanzas:

> In an ocean, 'way out yonder
>
> (As all sapient people know),
>
> Is the land of Wonder-Wander,

Whither children love to go;
It's their playing, romping, swinging,
That give great joy to me
While the Dinkey-Bird goes singing
In the Amfalula-tree!

There the gum-drops grow like cherries,
And taffy's thick as peas,--
Caramels you pick like berries
When, and where, and how you please:
Big red sugar-plums are clinging
To the cliffs beside that sea
Where the Dinkey-Bird is singing
In the Amfalula-tree.
(lines 1-16)

In one way, of course, this piece of sub-Learian nonsense is located in a truly alternative world, "the land of Wonder-Wander." Equally, though, there are hints here of the same exoticism of no precise location that Lear was able to produce from the miscommunications of colonial encounter. The name "Dinkey-Bird" is a compound which manages to sound stranger than the sum of its parts (we have the sense of an unusual species of bird as opposed merely to a bird that is dinky), while "Amfalula-tree" is not unlike Lear's "Bong-tree" in being a coinage at once evocative and ridiculous. Even if less

sophisticated than Lear's own work, this is a poem which in following Lear's example is traced with his interest in using obscurely foreign words to imitate, absurdly but also lyrically, in a song-like verbal music of refrain and repetition, the exotic landscapes of Romantic orientalism.

Where these American echoes of Lear and the colonial production of nonsense become particularly interesting is on those occasions when they involve references to real things or places. In Lear's poetry, fabled locations sometimes shade from explicit fantasy into upside-down reality. Bong trees grow on the coast of Coromandel, the South Indian setting for "The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò," just as they do in invented locations such as the country of the great Gromboolian plain and the Hills of the Chankly Bore, and in the land to which the Owl and the Pussy-cat sailed away; likewise, "The Pelican Chorus" is spoken by the King and Queen of the Pelicans, whose daughter Dell, having "given her heart away" to the King of the Cranes, departs their home on the River Nile for Lear's familiar "stranger plains," having "gone to the great Gromboolian plain" with her lover, where she too now "dwells by the streams of the Chankly Bore." A similar slippage between real and invented places occurs in the work of Lear's American imitators. Charles Edward Carryl's "The Walloping Window-Blind," about a sea journey to the "the Gulliby Isles," first appeared in *Davy and the Goblins* (1884). In addition to taking inspiration from Carroll's *Alice* books,

the poem also obviously derives from Lear's "The Jumblies" (1870). The poem ends thus:

> Composed of sand was that favored land,
> And trimmed with cinnamon straws;
> And pink and blue was the pleasing hue
> Of the Tickletoeteaser's claws.
> And we sat on the edge of a sandy ledge
> And shot at the whistling bee;
> And the Binnacle bats wore water-proof hats
> As they danced in the sounding sea.
>
> On rubagub bark, from dawn to dark,
> We fed, till we all had grown
> Uncommonly shrunk—when a Chinese junk
> Came by from the torriby zone.
> She was stubby and square, but we didn't much care,
> And we cheerily put to sea;
> And we left the crew of the junk to chew
> The bark of the rubagub tree.
> (lines 33-48)

This mixes elements of Lear and Carroll's nonsense, adopting a metre similar to Lear's "The Jumblies," and alluding to the same poem--"torriby zone" recalls "the Torrible Zone" the Jumblies are supposed to have visited ("The Jumblies," line

73)--but also, with "rubagub tree," recalling the "Jubjub bird" and "Tumtum tree" described in Carroll's "Jabberwocky" (*Alice* 132). What surprises in this fantastical context is the appearance of a Chinese shipping vessel, sailing in "from the torriby zone" but identified with a real location, as if the poem wants to keep alive the possibility that this alternative world touches our actual world. Are we then to imagine a Chinese crew to accompany the Chinese junk, "cheerily" abandoned by the speaker and his companions, and left to fend on "The bark of the rubagub tree," a possibility which opens the way to uncovering a dark side to this lightest of nonsense? Yes and no: the poem plays this likelihood against others, with Carryl's determination to fail to make sense eroding the solidity of his poem's action. As is true also of the despotic violence imagined in "The Akond of Swat," and of "The Cummerbund," in which a literal rendering of the poem's closing lines would have us envisage the nailing of a washerman to a wall, any attempt to excavate implicit ideological meaning in his poem is complicated by the anomalousness of the nonsense method. Critique does not feel an entirely secure option when absurdity is made so insistently to highlight the arbitrariness of linguistic and logical orders; as a form of reading, it must jostle for space with other ways of eliciting the text's significance. To admit this need not mean a return to the older view of nonsense as "not a universe of things but of words and ways of using them"

(Sewell 17); rather, it entails an awareness of the way that nonsense literature facilitates escape--to other worlds and other domains, including that of language--even if that escape is rarely total or absolute. James Williams and Matthew Bevis claim that Lear's poetry "is both somehow its own world, and inseparably embedded in the world of everything that is the case," and that it "is often playing these different truths against each other, shot through with curious aspect shifts and changes of perspective that allow objects, persons, or scenes to bear different meanings in the same moment" (7); "The Walloping Window-Blind" achieves a similar effect, in a way that is exemplary of what this essay has described in Victorian nonsense generally.

Where does this leave the colonial dimensions of Victorian nonsense? The suggestion in this essay has been that nonsense in its colonial production stands as a form of what Jason R. Rudy terms "transcultural thinking" (327), but then also tends to make the traces of this production obscure in its arrival at a vague foreign colouring and through its interest in using alien words to simulate a departure from the social function of language. It is this doubleness that in Lear's case allows him to conjure as well as mock the application of exotic tropes to unfamiliar persons and places.

This creates challenges for interpretation. The guiding interest of nonsense in the problems and perils of linguistic signification is often peripheral to studies concerned with

how it reflects or subverts the ideology of its cultural moment. Conversely, even if we are now more aware than ever of the cultural affiliations of Victorian nonsense, not least (in Lear's case) in relation to science and natural history, much of the linguistic analysis of nonsense literature tends to be historical only inasmuch as the pursuit of verbal pleasure against the arbitrary order of rule and convention is seen to have broad cultural resonance. As this essay has shown, however, a more precise historical understanding of the language of Victorian nonsense is certainly possible and plausible, at least if we allow for the ways in which nonsense also eludes or refuses cultural location. This requires, first, that play with words and sounds is taken seriously as matter for historical inquiry in itself rather than being seen merely to disguise the social forces at work beneath the nonsense text's surface; and second, that we notice that the intense self-awareness habitual to nonsense means it will more often remake or reconfigure modes of perception (such as the exotic) than be symptomatic of them. Above all, it means recognizing that nonsense both is and is not its own world, and that while to some extent insulated from our reality it is never entirely outside or beyond it.

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1. Here and elsewhere in the essay I use the Anglicized place names that Lear himself knew.
2. *Indian Journal* 95, 202, 188.
3. See Williams.
4. Lear notes in June 1874 that he has been reading Yeldham's collection of poems ("Diaries," 26 June 1874).

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